



Talking with Students about Death

General Information

1. Start with the facts. Provide as much information as the family allows to the students.
2. Provide a mini psycho education piece
 - a. MANY feelings may come up (sadness, anger, confusion, frustration, etc.)
 - b. There is no timetable for grief
 - c. It affects everyone differently (not just age, gender, culture, but also how close you were to the person and how they died can have an impact on your grief)
 - d. Talking to others can help - particularly peers that have also experienced a loss (whether the same loss or others)
 - i. It is important to have a support system and lay this out for the students (peers, parents, friends, classmates, counselors, teachers etc.)
3. When talking to elementary school students it would be important to have an activity planned to help them address their grief.
 - a. The Christi Center has a toolkit and curriculum that provides activities that may be helpful for your students
4. If talking to teens, it is important to remind them to turn to their peers. Yes, you want to remind them about the counselors and staff, but many of them really only want to go to their peers. If it is a loss at a school, encouraging them to talk to their friends and classmates about the loss is extremely valuable.
5. If it was a traumatic loss like Suicide or Crime, it is important to talk to them about what this is bringing up for them. Always have the suicide resource list available and encourage them to reach out to the hotline if they ever feel SI themselves. However, it is important to help them understand that someone who dies by suicide has typically been fighting a hard, long fight that they just didn't win. Reinforcing that it was because they didn't have (or didn't recognize) the support around them. That is why you are talking to kids to ensure they know they can get support!



6. Express concern. Let students know you have heard about the loss and are available to listen or offer support.
7. Speak simply honestly. Children can tell when adults are being authentic. Do tell the child you are having emotions about the loss.
8. Listen and observe. Children can only process so much information at a time, they may not want to talk when you want to talk.
9. Offer practical advice
 - a. When you need to talk to someone, come find this person
 - b. Here is a code word we can use if you need a moment
10. Maintain contact. Talk about the loss whenever students bring it up. Take the time to be available for when students need to speak or plan to have the child go to the counselor when needed.

Talking to the Child Who Experienced the Loss

1. Speak with them privately upon their return. Invite the conversation. Use simple, direct, open-ended questions.
 - a. "Hi, I'm so sorry for your loss. I'm just concerned about you. Is there anything I can do to help you with your homework?"
 - b. "How are you doing with this?"
 - c. "Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?"
 - d. With Young Children: know that they grieve in different spurts, so they may bring it up at different points during the day.
2. Observe behavior. Provide support in an appropriate way for that child
 - a. After class, "Hey, I noticed you had your head down during class, how are you doing?"
3. Give them language that may be helpful to any questions or response,
 - a. Younger Children:
 - i. "Thank you."



- ii. "I'm feeling ____ right now."
- b. Older Children:
 - i. "Thank you that person meant a lot to me."
 - ii. "Yeah, it's hard time right now."
- 4. Limit personal sharing. Keep the focus on the death and what the student is expressing.
 - a. "I know how I've felt when someone I loved died, but I don't really know how you're feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?"
- 5. Be available when the student is ready. The student may not want to talk right now.
 - a. "When you are ready to talk, I'm here."
- 6. Avoid trying to "cheer up" the students or the family. Instead acknowledge that they may have some strong emotions right now.
 - a. Instead of, "I'm sorry you lost this person, but you must remember the good times in life too," try something like, "What sorts of feelings have you been having?"

Talking to Your Class about the Death of a Classmate

- 1. Preparing a statement for the students
 - a. This can be done in small classes (such as homeroom, or first or last period)
 - b. Give the facts, but do not volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming
 - i. With Younger Children:
 - 1. Death by suicide: "Their brain had a disease and they made their body stop working"
 - 2. Death by illness: "Their body stopped working because it was too sick"



3. Unknown death: "This person's body stopped working but we aren't sure why."
 - ii. With Older Children:
 1. Death by suicide: "They had a mental health disorder and it caused her to die."
 - a. Avoid any details
 2. Death by illness: "They had this illness and they died because of it."
 3. Unknown death: "We are not sure about why it happened, but this person had died."
 - c. Include information about mental health and support services that are available
 - d. Avoid public address systems, such as PAs or assemblies
2. Offer Academic Support Proactively
 - a. Change an assignment
 - b. Change the focus or timing of lessons
 - c. Reschedule or adapt exams
 - d. Be alert
 - i. Watch for signs that a child is struggling
 1. Physical symptoms: constant headaches, stomachaches, fatigue
3. Have a space for students to deal with difficult feelings
 - a. This can be done individually or in group settings
 - i. Allows for safe expression in a safe, non-judgmental environment
 - b. "Mr. John's death is very sad and may stir up some feelings including anger or sadness. All of this is normal."

- i. Avoid using euphemisms such as “he’s gone to a better place”
- c. It’s okay that you don’t have all the answer or can’t make it better
- d. Invite questions or concerns
 - i. It’s OK to say “I don’t know,” being available is what matters

Elementary prompts

- What are some of the feelings people have when someone they care about dies?
- Be ready to offer some suggestions (or show them an emotions chart to help them find some words)
- Where do you feel _ (named emotion) _____ in your body?
- What makes you feel better when you feel ____ (named emotion)?
- Who can give you support when you are having hard emotions (give examples)
- Sometimes even when we didn’t know someone that well (classmate or teacher), knowing that they died can still be hard. What feelings are you having about _____ dying?

Adolescent Prompts

- What is the primary feeling you are experiencing about the death? Then guide them according to their answer:
- Ask why they think that is their strongest feeling and if there are any other feelings that are coming up for them.
- Do some psycho ed around understanding mortality – particularly if the loss was classmate or teacher and they didn’t know them well. In that case, confusion, frustration (at school and those around them) and fear of their own death or that of a loved one is very common.
- Anger is commonly a part of grief. Why do you think that is? (It’s not fair, could be a person who caused it, can blame person who died, and grief itself simply heightens your reactions. So, what could have been a small anger reaction to something ends up out of proportion, because grief already has your emotions about to overflow.

- Who can you turn to if you want to talk or need some other kind of support? Help them brainstorm.
 - If this is their own loved one, it will be important for them to process the details (how, when and where they found out, who was with them, funeral, etc.)
 - Can you tell me about when you found out?
 - Did you attend the funeral? (If yes, please tell me about it. If no, ask if that was their choice and how they feel about that)
 - What is the hardest part of this loss for you so far?
 - Can be helpful to go through the “Common Well-Intentioned Remarks” pages in our grief booklet. Simply asking teens to talk about what they feel when they hear these “stupid statements” coming from people who just don’t know what to say, can be extremely powerful.
 - This is a great discussion piece for all levels of grief, because it helps the teens know what they should or shouldn’t say to those that may have been closer to the person. It also helps validate that it wasn’t helpful when they heard these things (It was God’s will, they are in a better place, they are not suffering anymore etc.)
4. Be aware that safety concerns may come up. The child may ask if this will happen to them
 - a. You can let them know that these events are very rare
 - i. “You can’t catch cancer when you play.”
 - ii. “The school is working hard to keep you safe.”
 5. Provide an ongoing space for students
 - a. Children grieve in different ways and through time, it’s important to be aware of what your students need, even if it is several months after the death
 6. When to Encourage Professional Help
 - a. When symptoms are impairing their day-to-day life
 - b. When a child wants to hurt themselves or someone else